



Rebound Headaches

When the occasional headache strikes, most of us head for the medicine cabinet or local pharmacy and take an over-the-counter pain medication, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), aspirin, or pain-relieving drugs containing caffeine.

A **rebound headache** may be the outcome if these medications aren't taken as directed. While over-the-counter pain relievers are helpful in improving headache pain, they must be taken with caution because they can actually make headaches worse if they are not taken correctly.

Overusing or misusing pain relievers by exceeding labeling instructions (such as taking the drug three or more days per week) or not following your doctor's advice can cause you to "rebound" into another headache.

When the pain medication wears off, you may experience a withdrawal reaction, prompting you to take more medication, which may lead to another headache and the desire to take more medication. This cycle may continue until you begin to suffer from chronic daily headaches with more severe headache pain and more frequent headaches. Pain reliever overuse appears to interfere with the brain centers that regulate the flow of pain messages to the nerves, resulting in worsening headache pain. In addition to the rebound headache, even over-the-counter pain relievers can be addictive, and you may experience a more intense pain when the medication wears off than if you never took it in the first place.

This rebound syndrome is even more common if your medication contains caffeine, which is often included in many pain relievers to speed up the action of the other ingredients. While it can be beneficial, caffeine in medications combined with caffeine consumption from other sources (coffee, tea, soft drinks, or chocolate), makes you more vulnerable to a rebound headache.

Drugs Causing Rebound Headache

Many commonly-used pain relievers, when taken in large enough amounts, can cause rebound headaches. Drugs once thought of as "safe" are turning up as the likeliest culprits. These include:

- Aspirin
- Sinus relief medications
- Acetaminophen (Tylenol)

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Drugs Causing Rebound Headache (continued)

- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications (such as Ibuprofen, Advil, Motrin, Aleve)
- Sedatives for sleep
- Codeine and prescription narcotics
- Over-the-counter combination headache remedies containing caffeine (such as Anacin, Excedrin)
- Ergotamine preparations (such as Cafergot, DHE)
- Butalbital combination pain relievers (such as Fiorinal, Fioricet)

While small amounts of these drugs per week may be safe (and effective), at some point, continued use can lead to the development of low-grade headaches that just will not go away. Taking larger or more frequent doses of the offending medication not only exposes the person to a higher level of the medication's harmful ingredients, but it can make the headache worse and continue indefinitely.

Rebound Headache Treatment

Usually, discontinuing the medication or gradually reducing the medication dose will lead to more easily-controlled headaches. Some people may need to be "detoxified" under more carefully-monitored medical conditions. People taking large doses of sedative hypnotics, sedative-containing combination headache pills, or narcotics such as codeine or oxycodone need to gradually taper off of these medications rather than discontinuing abruptly to avoid further complications.

Unfortunately, for many chronic daily headache sufferers, detoxification for the first several weeks leads to increasing headaches. Hang in there! Eventually, the headaches disappear and resume their previous intermittent nature.

Once you have detoxified from the daily or near-daily use of rebound headache-causing medication, you may use these pain relievers on a limited basis, but only when necessary and as long as they are effective. Don't take a medication just because you feel you need to do something. Do not use them more than once or twice a week. Avoid caffeine-containing products while taking pain relievers, especially medication that already contains caffeine.

In order to avoid going back into an overuse cycle, you may be prescribed a medication that prevents headaches. The purpose of this approach is to decrease the number of headaches you have, so that when you have a headache you can more effectively treat it with 'rescue' or as-needed medication.